

Human Rights Update

from Congressman Joe Pitts

Sixteenth Congressional District of Pennsylvania



THAILAND AND BURMA

In January, I traveled to Thailand, the Thai-Burma border, Laos and Vietnam with the U.S.-based organization, Jubilee Campaign, USA. The delegation included Lord David Alton of the British House of Lords. We had an excellent visit with government officials and non-government organizations (NGOs) as we discussed human rights concerns, particularly trafficking and religious freedom issues.

One of the key purposes of the trip was to hear direct testimonies of the suffering that the people of Burma endure at the hands of the military dictatorship, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Many Burmese have lived in refugee camps in Thailand on the border with Burma. These camps have made Thailand a safe haven for the refugees fleeing death and destruction in Burma.

The ruling military junta in Burma, has engaged in a deliberate policy to eliminate the ethnic minorities. A scorched earth policy, destroying entire villages along with food storage and production sources, systematic rape, the use of humans, including women and children, as landmine sweepers, forced labor, also known as slavery, the refusal to allow the duly elected leader of the country to take office, and many other abuses have turned the country of Burma into one large concentration camp.



These four Karen orphans witnessed the murder of their father by the Burmese military.

Sadly, the international community has turned a deaf ear to the cries of ethnic minorities, the refugees, the IDPs, and the democracy activists. Several organizations track the violations in Burma and we were given copies of dozens of reports providing detailed documentation of the SPDC's brutal human rights abuses.

The situation in Burma is dire, and I would not hesitate to call it, according to legal definitions genocide. We visited refugee camps north of Mae Sot, Thailand and spoke with Karen refugees, Christians, Buddhists, and Muslims who had all fled the attacks of the SPDC on their communities. We saw landmine victims, orphans and school children, who all had suffered from the actions of the SPDC. The Thai government has been gracious in caring for these refugees, often

with little help from the international community, yet there are many hiding in the jungles of Burma who need a safe place to go.

Our visit with the refugee orphans was both heart-wrenching and delightful. It was a delight to see these young children and to hear the songs they sang to us, but it was heart-wrenching to hear the amount of tragedy in these young lives. One group of four children, the oldest was 12, had lost their father; their mother could not take care of

them so she brought them to the orphanage. An eight-year-old boy, who could not smile, saw his parents murdered, was then trafficked across into Thailand as slave, somehow escaped from his "owners," and reached the safety of the refugee camps.

It is heartbreaking to know that many of the young children, including the orphans, in the refugee camps had watched family or community members being killed by the SPDC, wounded or killed by landmine explosions, raped, or even burned alive.

The ethnic cleansing of Burma is an international tragedy and the United States government and international community must help these people. The international community can send human rights monitors to Burma, pursue prosecution of those responsible for

Continued on page 2...

LAOS

Our delegation met with a number of Thai officials to discuss issues related to Burma and then traveled to Laos and Vietnam. In Laos, one of the poorest countries in the world, we met with government officials and some church leaders regarding various human rights concerns and other issues. Religious freedom issues have been a major concern in Laos, but reports from various organizations and officials suggest that the problem is slowly being addressed and there has been progress. The openness and frankness of our discussions with officials in Laos was greatly encouraging as was their desire to improve the development of their country. The church here appears to be healthy and growing despite pressure from local governments.

Visit Congressman Pitts' Human Rights page at:
<http://www.house.gov/pitts/rights>



**Lord David Alton and Congressman Pitts
with two Laotian pastors.**

THAILAND AND BURMA

Continued from page 1...

these crimes against humanity, press for the immediate end to deportation of democracy groups back to certain death in Burma, press strongly for the recognition of the democratically elected government of Burma, and send international peacekeepers to Burma.

The United States government could do more to assist the refugees in Thailand, increase pressure on the military regime in Burma and those nations that assist the SPDC, and further assist the democracy and humanitarian organizations focusing on

aid to the people of Burma. One practical way we can assist the refugees is by offering scholarship opportunities for the refugee students to study abroad – the refugees currently have no legal means to continue their education past middle or high school.

In addition to all the human rights abuses committed by the military, the SPDC military runs, controls and earns the profits off the illegal drug trade of a reported 1 billion plus methamphetamine pills per year. It is vital that we work even more closely with the Thai government in fighting the drug trade controlled by the Burmese military.

**Muslim refugee
children from Burma
eagerly awaiting a
piece of candy from
Congressman Pitts**



There are reports of the SPDC forcing its soldiers to take drugs before attacking ethnic groups – captured SPDC military personnel sometimes have difficulty remembering what took place during an attack because they were given drugs.

While in Thailand, our delegation also met with organizations assisting women and children, often ethnic minorities from Burma, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam, who are victims of trafficking. Organizations, such as the New Life Center, provide counseling, health and medical advice and treatment, education and job skills opportunities for victims; many of those at risk for being trafficked, after the assistance provided by NGOs, return to their communities to help educate women and children about trafficking, health, and other issues.

For more on Burma, visit:
www.prayforburma.org

VIETNAM

While in Vietnam, we visited the Hoa Lo (aka the *Hanoi Hilton*), the notorious prison where members of our armed services were held during the Vietnam War and where Vietnamese citizens previously were imprisoned by the French military. The glass shards on the walls, the placards of personal stories, the stocks where prisoners were unable to move, the isolation cells and the torture devices were sobering reminders of the suffering of many people in Vietnam. In addition we met with government officials and

representatives of Catholic, Protestant, and Buddhist religious groups. Prior to our visit, the Central Party had its Seventh Annual Plenum meeting, of which a major discussion point was religion.

Unfortunately, a key directive from that meeting, referred to in a news report from the South China Morning Post, calls for religious people to be patriotic by "volunteering" in the struggle to "foil all attempts of hostile forces who abuse religious and ethnic minority issues to sabotage national unity and act against [the] political regime."

This most likely means further attempts at control of religious groups in Vietnam. Recent reports by a number of reliable organizations reveal increasing harassment, persecution and imprisonment of religious believers.

A wall-sized bronze depiction of stocks with iron shackles where prisoners were unable to move



Lord David Alton and Congressman Pitts with orphans at a refugee camp on the Thai-Burma border.



HUMAN RIGHTS CONFERENCE

On April 5, 2003, I will be hosting the 16th Congressional District Human Rights Conference on International and Domestic Trafficking in Persons at the Lancaster Christian Missionary & Alliance Church, in Lancaster, PA. Trafficking in persons is one of the fastest growing crimes in the world. The State Department's June 2002 *Trafficking in Persons Report* estimates that between 700,000 and four million men, women, and children are trafficked each year into the sex industry and/or slave-like labor conditions. CIA reports estimate that between 50-100,000 women are trafficked into the United States each year. It is vital that governments around the world address these issues and that non-governmental organizations, including faith-based organizations, and the American people are involved in stopping trafficking and in assisting the victims of trafficking.



Congressman Pitts with tribal girls at the New Life Center in Thailand.

Download the State Department report from their website: <http://www.state.gov/g/tip/rls/tiprpt/>

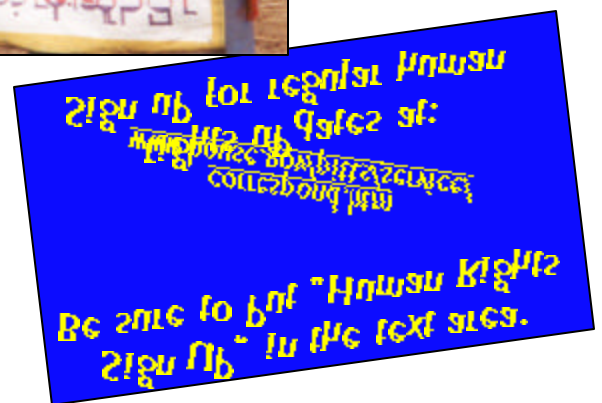
HUMAN RIGHTS SUBCOMMITTEE

I was honored last month to be named Vice-Chairman of the Subcommittee on International Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Human Rights by Congressman Henry Hyde (R, IL-06), Chairman of the House Committee on International Relations. In my capacity as Vice-Chair I will work with Congressman Elton Gallegly (R, CA-24) to promote human rights and democracy around the world.

The Subcommittee maintains oversight and legislative responsibilities over the United States' efforts to manage and coordinate international programs to combat terrorism; oversight of, and legislation pertaining to nonproliferation; and oversight of and legislation pertaining to matters relating to human rights.



Karen refugee girls welcoming the delegation to a refugee camp Bible School.



CONGRESSMAN JOSEPH R PITTS
204 CANNON HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON DC 20515


M.C.